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ABSTRACT

This study sought to determine which sources of information were most often used by the West Virginia public higher education governing board, and to assess the sources' usefulness in examining major higher education policy issues. Data were based on a mailed survey that asked members of the Board of Directors of the West Virginia state college system to identify which of 25 external and internal sources of information they found most useful. Sources included campus catalogs, institutional audits and reports, a statewide higher education report card, state higher education publications, Southern Regional Education Board publications, and the World Wide Web. Of 12 voting board members, nine returned surveys. Analysis indicated that, on average, board members used 10.89 sources, with six, including the statewide higher education report card and special reports prepared by central staff, judged as the most useful internal sources. All board members also obtained information from external sources such as local newspapers and state legislators. Respondents were also asked to rank important policy issues. Of the 18 issues listed, presidential activities and evaluations, legal issues, and enrollment ranked as the most important. Five data tables are included. (CH)

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INFORMATION THAT MATTERS TO THE BOARD: SOLID SUPPORT FOR SOUND DECISIONS

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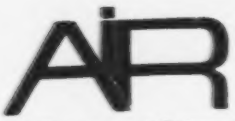

for Management Research, Policy Analysis, and Planning

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Jean Endo
Editor
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Abstract

Of the measures that matter to institutional researchers, few have the potential for more far-reaching impact on a higher education institution or system than the information prepared for governing boards. The Association of Governing Boards encourages trustees to "insist on seeing the long-range impact of short-range decisions" and to "ask for data, both hard (cost, registration, statistics) and soft (who favors it, who does not, who benefits, and who loses)." Indeed, as Winston (1994) observes, trustees need "comprehensible, comprehensive information. . .to help direct their attention to the institution's *strategic* decisions." This exploratory study offers insight into the most frequently used - and most useful - information sources for one public higher education governing board. It also probes the question, "How much detail is enough?" and elicits possible future information needs based on the board members' perceptions of major policy issues. The findings point to the significance of statistical documents and special reports prepared for the governing board, suggesting that institutional research and planning staff can play an invaluable role in the governance and policy-making process.

INFORMATION THAT MATTERS TO THE BOARD: SOLID SUPPORT FOR SOUND DECISIONS

Presented to the 37th Annual AIR Forum
May 21, 1997

Introduction

Institutional and multi-campus system governing boards are entrusted with the strategic decisions and policy choices which influence the future direction of their institution(s). In "20 Steps to Responsible Trusteeship," the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) advises trustees to "insist on seeing the long-range impact of short-range decisions" and admonishes them to "ask for data, both hard (cost, registration, statistics) and soft (who favors it, who does not, who benefits, and who loses)" before deciding on policy issues. Indeed, governing boards of institutions and of systems require data if they are to make informed decisions. However, "many trustees know the information they need to make sound decisions is obscured by the blizzard of paper they receive. Often, the time-consuming task of gleaning usable information from lengthy reports is one of the key obstacles to improving board efficiency and performance" ("Overhauling Paper Overload," 1995, p. 32). As Winston (1994) observes, "It's difficult to keep focused on the wider issues of governance without appropriate information, and it's tempting to focus on nitpicking detail if that's all you're informed about" (p. 10).

What level of data and information provides board members with a solid basis for their decisions yet deters expeditions into unnecessary detail? Further, what information sources do

board members use most -- and find most useful? This paper offers insight into these issues through examining the pleasure of one public higher education governing board with respect to the appropriate level of detail for decision-making and its most useful sources of information.

Purpose

First, this exploratory study sought to identify the chief sources of information used by governing board members and to assess the usefulness of each of those sources to the trustees. Specific attention then focused on the various categories of information prepared by the Chancellor's Office and Central Office staff to determine whether that information is judged to offer too much, too little, or an appropriate level of detail for the board's governance process. To gain a deeper understanding into possible future information needs of the board, the study also explored the major policy issues expected to confront higher education within the next several years. The results of this investigation offer staff greater insight as to the information which board members find most useful and suggest ways in which staff can provide even more effective support in preparing and presenting information to this important constituency.

Literature

John Nason's (1982) classic work defines twelve responsibilities of governing boards: setting mission and purposes; appointing the president; supporting the president; monitoring the president's performance; insisting on long-range planning; reviewing educational and public service programs; ensuring adequate resources; ensuring good management; preserving institutional independence; relating campus to community; serving as a court of appeal; and assessing board performance. Focusing on the specific fiduciary role of ensuring adequate resources, Gordon C. Winston (1994, p. 10) stresses that "the need for good,

accessible, and complete economic performance information for boards and academic communities is taking on a new urgency. . .[T]rustees certainly need comprehensible, comprehensive information about the institution that enables them to carry out their legal fiduciary responsibilities. But they also need such information to help direct their attention to the institution's *strategic* decisions, where boards are most needed, most effective, and most appropriate. It's difficult to keep focused on the wider issues of governance without appropriate information, and it's tempting to focus on nitpicking detail if that's all you're informed about." Applying a corporate analogy of trustees as investors in their institution(s), Lazerson (1997, p. 14) asserts that these "investors want the data."

However, while certain details may prove tempting, board members most often direct their attention to the "bottom line." According to one highly respected board chair, "the time and energy higher education leaders have available for their institutions grow scarce as demands on them reach near insatiable levels" (Weaver, 1995, p. 5). Governing board members not only must participate in deciding sometimes difficult issues at regular board and committee meetings; in the current environment, they are increasingly called upon to work with their institutions' numerous constituents" and to say a good word about [the] college wherever and whenever [they] can" ("20 Steps to Responsible Trusteeship," 1993, p. 27). As a result, little time remains for distilling highly technical or complex data; board members require information that is presented in a clear and concise manner, with sufficient detail to provide a solid basis for reaching a sound decision without becoming overwhelming.

To fully understand and assess the strategic position of their institution(s), boards should have access to information in the following critical categories outlined by Taylor,

Meyerson, Morrell and Park (1991): the student body, faculty and administration, academic programs, research, facilities, tuition and financial aid, student support, other unrestricted resources, and finances. These areas comprise such specific indicators as number of applicants, students enrolled, retention rates, tenure rates, faculty and staff salary levels, quality of faculty, demand for programs, research funding, planned construction, tuition and fee increases, internal and external financial aid, sources of revenue, and expenditures by category.

Data Sources and Methodology

Survey Instrument

To better serve the information needs of their governing board, the Chancellor and the Director of Research and Information Systems for the State College System of West Virginia developed a survey to explore the board's chief information sources and preferred level of detail for decision making. Individual board members were invited to respond to this written survey which asked them to identify the various sources from which they obtain information about the system as well as about higher education in general. These sources were categorized as "internal" and "external," with internal representing those elements originating within the Central Office or on the campuses. These fifteen internal sources included the "Board Notes" publication, campus catalogues, the system (Chancellor's and Central Office) staff, classified staff, faculty, financial audits and reports, the statewide "Higher Education Report Card," campus presidents, other campus administrators, other board members, special reports, the annual "Statistical Profile" for the system, students, student newspapers, and state system newsletters.

Comprising the ten external sources were: Association of Governing Boards (AGB) publications, business leaders, the "Chronicle of Higher Education," legislators, local newspapers, other media, parents of students, State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) publications, Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) publications, and the World Wide Web. A blank line for "other national or regional higher education organizations" offered board members the opportunity to designate other important sources of information. After identifying the specific internal and external sources they use to learn about higher education issues, board members rated the usefulness of these sources on a scale of 1 ("not useful") to 5 ("very useful").

With special emphasis on materials routinely prepared by the system office, board members were then asked to assess the appropriateness of the level of detail they receive in fifteen major categories. In addition to the critical areas outlined by Taylor, Meyerson, Morrell and Park (students, faculty and administration, academic programs, research, facilities, tuition and financial aid, and finances), board members evaluated the depth of information they receive regarding classified staff, community colleges, legal issues, presidential activities and evaluations, and technology. The three possible ratings were: 1 ("too detailed"), 2 ("about right"), and 3 ("not sufficiently detailed").

To help anticipate issues that may continue to increase in importance for higher education in general and for West Virginia higher education in particular, board members were asked the following two open-ended questions: "In your opinion, what are the most important policy issues facing higher education in general as we approach the year 2000?" and "In your

opinion, what are the most important policy issues facing West Virginia higher education as we approach the year 2000?"

Composition of the Board

The Board of Directors of the State College System of West Virginia comprises sixteen members: ten appointed by the governor; three serving as elected representatives of the faculty, staff, and students, respectively; and three (the Chancellor of the University System of West Virginia, the State Superintendent of Schools, and the Chair of the Joint Commission on Vocational-Technical-Occupational Education) serving as non-voting, ex-officio members. One of the ten gubernatorially-appointed positions was vacant at the time this survey was administered. The twelve voting members include representatives of the banking, legal, and education professions, and their length of service on the board ranges from one to eight years. Each of the twelve voting members received a copy of the survey in the mail in early 1997 along with a message from the Chancellor explaining the reason for the study and encouraging board members to respond . Several weeks later, a second copy of the survey was distributed to those who had not yet replied.

Findings

Number of Information Sources

Of the twelve voting members on the board, nine (75%) returned a completed and usable survey. Table I below provides a frequency count of the number of the internal and external sources used by the board members. The number of internal or system sources used by each individual board member ranged from seven to fifteen with an average of 10.89. One respondent reported using all fifteen sources. Board members referred to between three and ten different external sources with an average of 6.11. Two individuals indicated that they used

all ten sources. Combining the two types of sources, board members used from eleven to twenty-five different sources with an average of 17.

TABLE I

Frequency Distribution: Internal (System) Sources Used		Frequency Distribution: External Sources Used		Frequency Distribution: Total Number of Sources Used	
Number of Sources	Frequency	Number of Sources	Frequency	Number of Sources	Frequency
15	1	10	2	25	1
14	1	8	1	22	1
13	1	6	2	20	2
12	2	5	1	19	1
9	1	4	1	12	3
8	2	3	2	11	1
7	1				
Average	10.89	Average	6.11	Average	17.00

Variety and Usefulness of Internal Sources

All nine (100%) of the respondents reported that they turn to the following five internal information sources: the "West Virginia Higher Education Report Card" (a statewide accountability document required by West Virginia statute), the Central Office and Chancellor's staff, special reports, the annual "Statistical Profile of Higher Education in West Virginia," and the campus presidents. Thus, only one-third of the possible fifteen sources were used by all board members. The reliance on individual presidents suggests that these board members do value information emanating from the campus level where the "real business of education takes place" and not just that provided by central administrators (Callan, 1994, p. 19). Eight (89%) reported "other board members" as a source of information, and seven (78%) used the system publication, "Board Notes" and the annual financial audits. Table II displays the percentage of respondents who rely on these as well as on the remaining seven sources. The source cited least frequently (by only three respondents) was classified staff.

TABLE II

Internal Sources of Information:
Use by Respondents and Average Rating of Usefulness

Source	Percent Using	Average Rating
"Higher Education Report Card"	100%	4.78
Special Reports	100%	4.78
"Statistical Profile of Higher Education"	100%	4.67
Central Office and Chancellor's Staff	100%	4.56
Presidents of Institutions	100%	4.22
Other Board Members	89%	4.50
"Board Notes"	78%	4.14
Financial Audits	78%	3.71
System Newsletter and Other Publications	67%	4.00
Faculty	56%	3.80
Student Newspapers	56%	3.20
Students	44%	3.75
Other Campus Administrators	44%	3.50
Campus Catalogues	44%	2.75
Classified Staff	33%	4.00

How useful are each of these information sources? An examination of the average degree of usefulness displayed in Table II reveals that the six sources used by at least 89% of board members also proved to be the most useful to them. The "West Virginia Higher Education Report Card" and special reports prepared by the central staff were rated highest, averaging 4.78 of a possible total of 5 points. Following these are the "Statistical Profile of Higher Education" (4.67), the Central Office and Chancellor's staff (4.56), other board members (4.50), and presidents (4.22). Cited by fewer than half of the respondents, campus catalogues were rated as the least useful source (2.75).

Variety and Usefulness of External Sources

Examining the ten external sources, 100% of the board members obtain information from local newspapers, and 8 (89%) cite legislators as an important source. Indeed, legislators emerge as the source with the highest average usefulness (4.38 of a possible 5 points) while newspapers earn an above average rating of 4.11. Although the ratings for parents of students and the World Wide Web also fall toward the high end of the scale (each at 4.33), only one-third of the respondents indicated using those two sources. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) organization, a significant source of information for system heads and governing or coordinating board staff, also was cited on a mere 33% of the surveys. The single addition to the list from the open-ended "Other" category was the National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO). Table III details the percentage of respondents who make use of the various external sources and their average rating of the usefulness of these items.

TABLE III

External Sources of Information:
Use by Respondents and Average Rating of Usefulness

Source	Percent Using	Average Rating
Local Newspapers	100%	4.11
Legislators	89%	4.38
AGB Publications	78%	4.00
"Chronicle of Higher Education"	78%	3.86
Other Media	67%	3.83
Business Leaders	56%	4.00
SREB Publications	44%	4.00
Parents of Students	33%	4.33
World Wide Web	33%	4.33
SHEEO	33%	3.67

Level of Detail

Given the ratings in each of the fifteen key categories of information provided to the board shown in Table IV, it appears that the Chancellor and Central Office staff are serving the members' informational needs relatively well. With a rating of 2 defined as an appropriate level of detail, 1 as too much detail and 3 as not sufficiently detailed, only the areas of finance and research activities tended to be somewhat more detailed than necessary. Conversely, presidential activities and evaluations, with an average rating of 2.78, was the sole area in which board members expressed the desire for more detailed information. The other twelve areas are shown in Table IV together with their ratings. With the ratings in these areas ranging from 2.0 to 2.44, board members appear to be generally satisfied with the information they receive.

TABLE IV

Level of Detail :
Board Members' Ratings of Key Areas of Information
(In Ascending Order of Detail)

Presidential Activities and Evaluations	2.78
Legal Issues	2.44
Enrollment	2.33
Technology	2.33
Academic Programs	2.22
Salary Levels	2.22
Students and Student Activities	2.22
Classified Staff	2.13
Facilities	2.11
Faculty	2.11
Tuition and Fees	2.11
Community Colleges	2.00
Financial Aid Programs	2.00
Finances	1.80
Research Activities	1.80

1="Too detailed", 2="About right", 3="Not sufficiently detailed"

Future Policy Issues

To better understand the major policy issues that governing board members foresee on the horizon, each had the opportunity to list up to eight issues that will be important to (1) higher education in general and (2) West Virginia higher education in particular. Table V displays these results. Eighteen distinct issues emerged as holding major importance for higher education in general; nine of these were mentioned by more than one respondent. Funding and cost containment issues appeared the greatest number of times (7), followed by technology and distance learning issues (6), and diversity, managing change and conflicts of culture and values (5). Similarly, funding and cost containment issues were cited by all nine respondents and head the list of the ten West Virginia issues reported on more than one survey. Technology and distance learning issues, mentioned on seven surveys, follow with faculty salaries (4 citations) in third position. Another 16 issues specific to West Virginia were mentioned once for

a total of 26 different concerns. These individual issues included better advising, competition from external sources, system structure/governance, cultivating fresh and dedicated leadership, accountability, assessment, privatization, remediation, strengthening relationships and better coordinating with the public schools, and balancing support between the liberal arts and technical education. Seven of the items shown in Table V are common to both lists of policy issues cited by at least two respondents. However, even the items that do not appear to be mutual listings (tuition and financial aid, faculty contracts and tenure, mergers/consolidations, community college issues, and infrastructure/facilities) were, in fact, common to both when issues cited only once on the other list are taken into consideration.

TABLE V

Most Important Policy Issues Facing Higher Education

Higher Education in General

Issue	Citations
Funding/Cost Containment*	7
Technology and Distance Learning*	6
Diversity, Managing Change, Conflicts of Culture*	5
Access to Higher Education*	4
Quality Issues and Integrity of Curriculum*	3
Tuition and Financial Aid Issues	3
Faculty Salaries*	2
Faculty Contracts and Tenure	2
Improve Retention and Completion Rates*	2

West Virginia Higher Education

Issue	Citations
Funding/Cost Containment*	9
Technology and Distance Learning*	7
Faculty Salaries*	4
Access to Higher Education*	3
Quality Issues*	3
Improve Retention and Completion Rates*	3
Mergers/Consolidations	3
Community College Issues	3
Diversity, Managing Change, Conflicts of Culture*	2
Infrastructure/Facilities	2

* Denotes items cited by at least 2 respondents that are common to both lists

Discussion and Implications for Institutional Research

Each of these governing board members turned to multiple sources to obtain information about higher education in general and the State College System in particular. Indeed, the least number of sources reported on any survey was eleven of the possible total of twenty-five. However, of the eight internal and external information sources used by at least 89% of the directors, central office staff can control only four: the "Higher Education Report Card," special reports, "Statistical Profile of Higher Education," and Central Office and Chancellor's Staff. Presidents of the system's institutions, other board members, local newspapers, and legislators may offer a somewhat different perspective. The survey speaks significantly to the value placed on the staff's work; the effort involved in preparing major documents and reports appears to be a good investment of time.

As observed above, the board members appear to be generally well satisfied with the amount of detail provided by staff for key issues, with the one notable exception that of presidential activities and evaluation.

The major issues that board members expressed for West Virginia colleges and universities are nearly identical to those issues facing higher education across the nation although the West Virginia list contains both a greater variety of issues and a larger number of concerns expressed by only one respondent. Among the West Virginia issues surfacing on only one survey were: system structure/governance, cultivating fresh and dedicated leadership, strengthening the relationship and coordinating with public education, balancing support between liberal arts and technical education, and better advising.

Of the measures that matter to institutional researchers, few have the potential for

more far-reaching impact on a higher education institution or system than the information compiled for and presented to governing boards. This may be particularly true if Lazerson (1997) is correct in his assertion that today's governing boards are becoming more activist and, as in the corporate world, demanding more "benchmarks of institutional success" (p. 12). The findings of this exploratory study offer insight into the sources of information that are most often used by - and found most useful to - one state college system governing board. It would be informative to administer this survey on a broader scale to obtain a more encompassing picture of the information needs of governing boards in both the public and private higher education sectors. This study also points to the significance accorded statistical documents and special studies prepared for the board, suggesting that institutional research and planning staff can play an invaluable role in the governance and the policy-making process.

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